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## THE SPIRITUALITY OF MILITARY BADGES

Lieutenant Colonel George Heart, WASG

When I received my ecclesiastical certification<sup>1</sup> in 1991 as a Jewish Lay Leader, my very first official duty was to fly to Germany to organize and help conduct memorial services for a deceased American World War Two veteran. I was also tasked to coordinate the movement of the body back to California for burial which necessitated coordination between the Army, numerous American and German governmental agencies, and several Jewish organizations across two continents.

This was quite a challenge and complicated task for a newly minted lay leader who had just received his silver 1LT bars. But the real challenge was that the deceased World War Two veteran was my own father - he had been battling cancer for over eight years and had gone to Germany for treatment.

In a way coordinating my father's funeral across two continents helped me in my initial grieving process. I kept busy and did not have much time to mourn. However, I remember, sitting alone in the U.S. Military Chapel in Munich, Germany waiting for the Jewish Chaplain to arrive to help me conduct the memorial service the next day. As I was sitting in the dimly lit chapel I started feeling overwhelmed and very lonely. After a while I noticed a military officer in Class A's enter the chapel. I approached the officer and saw that he was wearing Master Jump Wings on his chest. Only then I made out the silver crosses of a Christian Chaplain on his jacket. He was a local US Army chaplain who heard that a memorial service was being planned in the chapel and wanted to come and help. Something very remarkable happened to me when I met this chaplain.

I felt an immediate connection with him. It was not necessarily that he was a chaplain. But rather an instantaneous recognition that this chaplain went through training and experiences that made us brothers. Now, I have never jumped out of a "perfectly safe airplane" - but I knew he had. He was part of the "brotherhood" and he had endured rigorous training and just like me, had served with others in situations that can only be experienced within the military family and brotherhood. Instantaneously I knew that I was able to confide and trust in him.

For the first time I was able to talk to someone about MY grief, MY experiences of losing a father, and ME being heard. Yes, he was a chaplain and was trained to listen to me and to counsel me. But more importantly because of that little silver badge he wore on his chest, I was able to RELATE to him, to regard him as one of my BROTHERS. Sometimes when I met other chaplains, I was more in *deference* to them. They seemed to be not really part of the brotherhood of soldiers. You know, they were CHAPLAINS...

I don't even remember the name of this Christian Chaplain I met that afternoon in the chapel. But he had a lasting impression on me. I was able to relate to him because of what I could "read" on his uniform about his experiences in the military. It made me feel connected to him, it made me feel at ease. Isn't that one of the goals every chaplain or lay leader would want to achieve? Connect with the soldiers that we serve and break down the barriers so we can minister better to our fellow soldiers?

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<sup>1</sup> Ecclesiastical certification and endorsement as a Jewish lay leader is conducted by the Jewish Chaplains Council and includes selection, application, training and confirmation of Jewish military personnel by chaplains of all faiths as well as from the Jewish Chaplains Council.

One way that can be accomplished is to undergo the same training and experiences the “regular” soldiers go through. Now, I don’t recommend that chaplains should go out and earn as many badges and patches as they can to “fit in.” However, if chaplains could go through the same experiences as the rest of the soldiers and acquire skills and competencies, it will and can further their own ministry.

State Guard Chaplains may not have the opportunity to go and become Green Berets or jump out of airplanes every day, but there are many other opportunities to earn skills and competencies that will further one’s ministries. Each State Guard has great training opportunities that chaplains should contemplate. Earning these skills and competencies will help in creating that special “bond of brotherhood” and break down those barriers between chaplain, lay leader and soldier. Not only will chaplains and lay leaders create these bonds but they will also learn needed skills and abilities to truly function as one of the team.

One such training program that can accomplish all this and is open to all State Guard soldiers who belong to the State Guard Association of the United States (SGAUS) is the Military Emergency Management Specialist - or for short the “MEMS” Academy program. This training and qualification program was established by the SGAUS Board of Directors to promote and advance the emergency management profession and training among the ranks of State Guard soldiers. SGAUS members who have completed prescribed professional emergency management training and meet other requirements are eligible to apply for the MEMS badge qualifications.

Individuals who complete the required training receive qualification credentials issued through SGAUS and, if approved by their respective state military authorities, may wear the official SGAUS MEMS badges and patches on their military uniforms. In the basic program, all courses are taken through the FEMA Emergency Management Institute Independent Study Program. The courses teach vital emergency management and terrorism response skills that are essential for a first responder, such as a chaplain, when responding to natural or man-made disasters. There is generally no cost to the student and all courses can be taken online.

This is a unique opportunity for chaplains to earn some extremely valuable skills that are very much needed, especially as more and more State Guards shift to homeland security missions. The MEMS Academy program offers a Basic, Senior and Master Qualification. Over 750 SGAUS members have qualified so far. Most are State Guard members but we also have members from active duty, reserve and National Guard units who have complete the MEMS qualification. We get inquiries daily, even as far away as from deployed troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.

When I meet a chaplain today, I purposely look for certain “accouterments” on their uniforms to see if they are part of that unique “bond of brotherhood” of soldiers. I want to make sure for myself they have gone through the training and experiences that help me to connect with them. I want to know they profess the skills and abilities that not only make them superior chaplains, but also professionals and experts among us “brothers in arms!”

A chaplain or lay leader can make, will make, and should make a big difference in other soldier’s lives. A chaplain should be and must be approachable by every soldier regardless of faith or religious affiliation. Since 9-11 and just recently the Hurricane Katrina disaster, a State Guard chaplain must be especially skilled and accomplished in emergency management and terrorism response skills. This all can be accomplished by earning the MEMS qualification and earn the right to wear the SGAUS MEMS

badge! This simple badge can and will make a state guard chaplain part of the “bond of brotherhood” among State Guard soldiers. State Guardsmen will know that you have taken the time and effort to acquire skills and competencies that make you part of the team – part of the “bond.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The author invites individuals and units interested in the MEMS Academy qualification program to go to [www.sgaus.org](http://www.sgaus.org) and click on “MEMS Academy” or to contact him directly at [memsacademy@msn.com](mailto:memsacademy@msn.com).